



Pool Exchange by Nicolle Caputa | 2018

“The rush of a teenage crush can feel like a slow river, never leaving, or a wave crashing. The tide may continue, with or without you, but the true mistake, would be deciding not to swim.”

I sit still, letting the sun pour over my legs. I can feel the heat radiate throughout my skin. I close my eyes, blocking out all sound except for the lapping of the water against the concrete.

Molly pokes me in the arm, ruining my concentration. “Are you even listening?”

I open my eyes slowly and turn my head. “What?”

“Look! By the gate!” Molly is sitting completely upright now with her neck craned toward the entrance.

I glance over to see a boy, about our age, holding a blue, pool noodle. He seems to be waiting for some more people to join him. Soon, a group stampedes through the door and they all go to one of the tables. The girls are already in their swimsuits, applying layers of tanning lotion and wearing sunglasses, obviously with no intention of actually using the pool. The guys are attempting to push them as they squeal and back away from the edge of the water.

The boy Molly was referring to remains on his phone at the table. His buddies come over and try to wrestle him out of his seat but finally give up.

“What’s the deal with him?” I ask.

Molly remains fixed, not even computing that I just spoke to her.

I give her a slight nudge. “Molly, who is he? Do you know him?”

“I did.” Her expression sinks deep into her face.

“You did?”

“I mean I do. We haven’t talked in a while though. Used to be friends in elementary school.”

“Why are you staring at him if you haven’t talked to him for at least three years?”

Her head whips around to stare at me now.

“I’m not staring! And besides he goes to a different school than us. I haven’t seen him in a while.”

“Okay, okay. If you don’t want to tell me what happened then I won’t ask.” I raise my eyebrows in her direction.

“Look, it’s just that...he makes me nervous.”

“Why?”

She takes her towel from under her and covers her whole body with it.

“I don’t know, he just does.”

I look back over to him and inspect his stature for any reason why a boy would make Molly so freaked out. He seems relatively normal but cute is an understatement. His brown hair lays in loose curls. From the blush rising in her cheeks, I take a guess as to why he makes her stomach wriggle.

At this point, all the girls in the group have gone into the pool and are now trying to keep their hair and sunglasses dry while the guys splash around them with a football.

“What’s his name?”

“Clay Gregory Williams. He lives near the grocery store. Plays piano in his school band. I think he likes baseball.”

I look at her gaping face. “Geez, are you obsessed with him or something?”

“NO! I’m just observant, okay?”

“Okay. Fine. I’m sorry.” I back off again.

I get to my feet and look down at Molly laying on her chair with the towel cascading over her.

“Okay, so you’re not obsessed, you just like him.”

“Please! That’s crazy! Besides he had a girlfriend.”

Her eyes don’t come away from the other side of the pool.

“Had?”

“Yeah not too long ago.”

I grab Molly’s arm and pull her from the chair.

“Where are we going?” she protests.

“Come on, I want to swim.”

“No, not now.”

“Why not?”

As I look up, I get the answer to my own question. Clay has put his phone down, removed his shirt, and is now heading for the water.

This makes me move faster. “Come on, it’s a big pool.”

I finally get Molly to throw her towel down when Clay is occupied with the football. Without her fabric shield, she runs to the edge of the pool and jumps into the water with a not-so-graceful cannonball. The girls in the group all look in her direction with smug smiles plastered across their foundation faces.

One of them is tugging on Clay’s arm and trying to lean in closer. He keeps pushing her away, saying he needs to focus on the game. I hop in the deep-end next to Molly just as her head pops out of the water. I try to keep a conversation going with her as she glances behind me every so often.

“Are you going to go talk to him?”

Her face wriggles, “Are you crazy? What would I even say? ‘Hey hows it going? I know I haven’t talked to you in years and you just got out of a relationship, but hows it going, *best pal*?’”

“Well, you obviously know a lot of about him. Maybe it’s time you reintroduce yourself since you’re far from baby-faced anymore!”

She makes a glance behind me and then her eyes dart toward my face in a panic. A splash bounces in my direction and I see the football sitting next to my shoulder.

“Throw it back!” I whisper to her.

Her whole body is panic stricken. “I can’t throw a football!”

“Then go hand it back to him!”

“No!”

“Do it! It’s getting weird!” I know this is way out of her comfort zone, but I also know she needs a small push.

She breathes in and then puffs out, “Fine!”

In both hands, she takes the football and slowly wades her way over to the group. The girls giggle in the corner, but the guys could care less. Clay makes a throwing motion that makes Molly stop in her tracks.

For a moment she hesitates and then chucks the ball to him. Surprisingly, it lands in his hands with a little extra effort on his part.

“Thanks, Molly.” He flashes his smile to her and then nods his head.

Molly nods and hurries back to the corner where I stand. The girls are going crazy, laughing and whispering.

When she gets back to me I see her twitching lip.

“What wrong?”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I talked to him. And he knew my name.”

I just smile at her and wonder what color fireworks are going off in her head right now. I look behind her and get a glance at Clay from across the pool. And catch his eyes in my direction. In *Molly’s* direction. His eyes dart away and he goes back to his game. The girl that has been trying to get his attention the whole time sees this. She pushes on his arm and goes back to the other girls.

“Don’t turn around, but he was just looking at you,” I saw in a giggle.

“No he was not. Don’t get my hopes up.”

“I’m dead serious. When he saw me looking, his eyes whipped away.”

“He was probably looking at you.”

“Trust me, he was looking at *you*,” I tell her.

“Really?”

I nod with a grin.

“So what do I do now?”

“Wanna play ‘Color’?”

I see her questioning it and then she nods with a smile. We’ve been playing this game since we were kids. It requires one person getting out of the pool and calling out names of colors and then becomes tag in the water. I’m fairly sure we didn’t invent it or anything, but I have no clue where it came from. We stopped playing it for a while once we got to high school but lately, I’ve felt defiant to conforming to the whole *just be cool* thing.

I volunteer Molly to go first in being the guesser. She begs me not to, so I decide to take the first turn. Standing out of the water makes my legs tremble. As I call out colors, I leave my arms across my body.

“Yellow?”

I hear a loud splash and turn quickly to see Molly swimming across the pool as quickly as she can. I'm about to jump in when I see her heading directly for the group of girls in the corner. I run around the edge of the pool and jump in front of her. Molly collides into my stomach and we both tumble slowly in the water.

The girls are losing their minds laughing at us once again. Molly pops out of the water in confusion. Her nose is gushing blood. The girls scream and jump out of the pool as if they just saw someone get decapitated. The guys all turn in a scramble, seeing no head floating in the water. They look around as kids run from the water too just because the girls frightened them.

Clay looks around and sees us standing in the water, with no sense of panic. He comes up closer behind Molly and notices the blood dripping in front of her.

"You guys okay?"

"Yeah, we're fine. Thanks," I say.

Molly and I climb out the pool. Standing on the edge, Clay goes to the table and then comes back over to us. In his outstretched hand is a handful of napkins. Water seeps through but Molly takes them anyway.

"Thank you."

Through her bright cheeks and now-bloody lips, I see a smile urging to break through.

"Sure."

Clay gives one of his small nods and then heads back over to his group. The guys push him around and tease him for the act of kindness he just performed. The girls flaunt around them in their bikinis. And Molly, she just stands there with a wad of napkins in her hand. Not moving a muscle. I have to actually push them up to her face myself to get the blood to stop.

And then, I see Molly make eye contact with Clay and he makes one small gesture that makes both of us blush and explode inside: Clay Gregory Williams *winks* at Molly.

A short story by Nicolle Caputa

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